ON PSYCHE’S LAWN

THE GARDENS AT PLAZ METAXU

ALASDAIR FORBES
ON PSYCHE’S LAWN: THE GARDENS AT PLAZ METAXU
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Front jacket:
View east over the main lawn from the Orexis Mount to Imbros.

Back jacket:
Kedalion: an early morning contre-jour effect.

Acer x freemannii ‘Autumn Blaze’ is in full sunlight, while Fraxinus ‘Raywood’ and Verbena bonariensis remain in the shade.

Endpapers:
Plan of Plaz Metaxu by Denise Outlaw and Robert Dalrymple.

Half title page:
The lake, Narcissus, frozen under a mantle of snow.

Opposite title page:
March sunset over the lake. The upright tree reflected in the water is the Ananke oak.

Page 6:
Orexis from the North Wood, facing south-west.

Acknowledgements · 7

A Physical Description of Plaz Metaxu · 8

1 · PLAZ METAXU AND ITS ARRIÈRE-PAYS · 10

PRELUDE
To a Tour of the Garden · 20

2 · ARRIVAL AT IOLKOS · 22

3 · ARTEMIS IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE · 30

4 · THE DISTRESS RETORT
Auxo, Hermes, Pasiphaë · 44

5 · THE AXIAL GARDEN
Pothos, Mnemosyne, Herse, The Bolt, Kairos, Orexis, Ananke, Hesperos · 72

INTERMEZZO
By Way of a Waterfall · 108

6 · TOWARDS A POETICS OF THE LAWN
Epidauros, Ithaka, Imbros, Kairos · 110

7 · TOWARDS A POETICS OF THE GARDEN LAKE
Narcissus · 132

8 · THE SOUTH GARDEN
Hades, Eleusis, Ariadne, Lerna, Rhodos · 152

INTERCESSION
By Way of a Caesura · 184

9 · THE NORTH WOOD
Alsos, Philyra, Corenzuela · 192

10 · THE PASTORAL LOOP
Eos, Pan, Hesperos, Themis, Kedalion · 208

APPENDIX
Chronology of the Garden’s Development · 238

Notes and References · 251

Bibliography · 284

Index · 290

Picture Credits · 304
A PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF PLAZ METAXU

PLAZ METAXU is a garden in Devon, in the South-West of England, that has been created since 1992. It occupies a west-facing valley, and extends over 32 acres, nearly half of which is a pastoral landscape grazed by sheep. A stream flows east-west through the valley, entering the garden in the orchard, then taking the form of a canal in front of the house, where it is flanked by a gently terraced lawn. Behind the house, there is a series of enclosed gardens – a walled garden and two courtyards that were formerly the farmyards. The main garden unfolds to the west of the house and is centred on the lake, made in 1994. The extensive lawns around the lake are fringed by areas of woodland, hedged enclosures and sheltered walks, themselves linking adjacent groves. Below the dam of the lake, a last formal area is bounded by a ha-ha. The stream, which is diverted around the lake in the main garden, here returns to its original course before flowing on down the centre of the valley to a final pond with a cascade. While open to the west, and to the sky, the valley, from within the garden, is largely self-contained. Extensive panoramas do, however, occur, from either side of the valley, on the high walk that has been landscaped within the encircling pastures. This expansiveness adds an important dimension to the garden, as does the reciprocity of contact (which is vital) between the garden and its surrounding fieldscape.

Garden Plan

A plan of the garden can be seen on the endpapers at the front and back of this book. Areas of the garden are identified by the numbers 1–39. Features within the garden areas are identified by the letters A–U. These numbers and letters are shown in square brackets throughout the text, thus: [00].
But I never wanted the visual inheritance of the garden to crowd out its ‘poetic courage.’ I knew that a garden should be responsible to paradise, but I wanted, like the pastoral elegists, to ‘place sorrow’ there as well. I valued the recreational garden, but not as much as I valued Psyche (or the soul). What could she bring to the garden, I wondered? I was haunted at the threshold (of the site, as well as of my undertaking) by a sentence I had read about her in Julia Kristeva’s book Black Sun: ‘without a psyche, only a haunted at the threshold (of the site, as well as of paradise, with no acknowledgement of Psyche – or the dark, reflexive gap she introduces into experience – which is where we can pause to remember what space means to us, in a state of humble gratitude as well as troubled exile, after the fiat of Expulsion. I use a biblical reference only because the paradigm of Eden is still the dominant one in the garden culture in the West. But Gethsemane, as well as Eden, was a garden. Why, then, I wondered, unlike the other arts, do gardens so seldom acknowledge that? Psyche is present often in the garden (fig. 3) (c), one of many such mythic figures or gods who have become domiciled at Plaz Metaxu, and are borrowed, almost always, from the Greek pantheon. Many areas of the garden are named after, and dedicated to, such figures. This may be an unfamiliar enough circumstance today to require an explanation. Of course, reference to gods (not necessarily of the ‘classical’ variety) was widespread, and even usual, in gardens before the nineteenth century. Today, with a few notable exceptions, such as Finlay’s reinvention of a ‘hyperborean’ Apollo at Little Sparta, such references have descended into kitsch. Yet ‘modern’ Western culture is not as immune to taking the afterlife of the gods seriously as the ethos of contemporary garden ing leads us to suppose. We have only to think of Nietzsche’s use of Dionysus and Apollo,” or Freud’s use of Narcissus, Eros, Thanatos and Oedipus,” as key determinants of cultural behaviour, to realize how mistaken it is to suppose the gods are dead. I am not a classicist. My familiarity with the Greek gods, in particular, does, of course, derive in part from the texts, say, of Homer, Euripides and Ovid (in translation), but it is also mediated through other channels: Renaissance art and Pausanias, for example, or the poetry of Hölderlin (on Chiron and Mimerosyne, say)” and Rilke (Orpheus). An abiding inspiration has also been archetypal psychology, especially the work of James Hillman, which not only reads the myths into our lived experience today with moving acumen and insight, but bravely holds out (against scientific orthodoxies) for a ‘poetic basis of mind’, as well as privileging a polytheistic temper. Archetypal psychology is closer to art than it is to science in its respect for the imagination. It accords high status to the realm of the ‘imaginal’ and even, remarkably, thins with images whenever it can, so helping to heal the rift in our psyches between intuitive and rational ways of understanding the world, that is also the split between a polarizing ‘spirit’ and a more conciliatory ‘soul’. My first encounter with archetypal psychology (many years before I started work on the garden) came through the volume Puur Pupers, which included Hillman’s essay ‘Peaks and Valleys’, in which he drew out the distinction between a puur spirit (puur is the Latin word for boy, and the puur here discussed is the puur aeternus or ‘eternal youth’) that identifies – indispensably, but vainly – with the advantages of height, and the lowlier, more receptive perspective of Psyche, or soul, whose characteristic dwelling place is the valley. Perhaps starting with my studies on landscape painting (especially the work of Caspar David Friedrich), I had noticed how important what I then called the ‘appeal to space’ had become for me in my life, in complement to, or distinction from, the appeal to a god, or to another person. The confirmation that Hillman’s essay gave me that spatial phenomena such as valleys or mountain tops were indeed consonant with, and images for, archetypal psychological drives or prompts, and that these prompts could themselves be attributed to mythic characters such as Psyche and the puur aeternus, made a deep impression on
and counter-normative accommodations. 

search for asymmetrical balances, invisible pivots scope for redemption implicit in his liminal way celebrate Hermes' profound perspectivism, and the inscriptions, in their different ways, therefore read death and life as implacably opposed? Both mously? Or at least to alter the way in which we ingenuity to rescue the doomed boy, even posthu- 

among his children!). Perhaps it is not beyond his 

In the Hellenistic period, Hermes’ career as an esoteric Magnus began. He became known as Hermes Trismegistus, and was often associated with the Egyptian god Thoth. This was how he was known to the alchemists. I made two attempts to include Hermes the magician in the courtyard. The first of these was in the right arm of the T, a rather more confined area than the left arm (with the Labyrinth in it). To commemorate the importance of the number three to Hermes (Trismegistus means 'thrice greatest') I decided to plant six standard hollies (Ilex aquifolium) in the shape of a triangle (fig. 38). All of the planting in the courtyard was problematic: the ground was extremely compacted, and had to be dug out with a mini digger. Where we made beds at the foot of the walls, we broke no fewer than 19 pipes, including the one carrying the water mains, which entered the courtyard from under one of the barns! The pits dug for plants in the centre of the courtyard created other problems. There were eight of these in all: the six for the hollies, and two others, one for a pine (Pinus sylvestris) (‘Chantry Blue’) and one for an arbutus (A. unedo f. rubra). The problem was that the pits, once filled with good soil, acted as sumps: the surrounding ground was too compacted to allow rainwater to drain away, and so the plants all died (it took us a while to identify the problem, as the surface gravel masked the cause). Cyril, digging with a pickaxe (‘two-pole’), undertook the onerous task of connecting each of these pits individually to a water-carrying cross-drain, without disturbing the laid paths (fig. 42). All the replacement plants have survived except for one of the hollies, which no longer therefore form a strict triangle. Aesthet- ically, the loss is minimal. The other reference to Hermes Trismegistus is in the form of a blacksmith’s mandril (on which wheels were made), which doubles as a wizard’s hat. The pun retains the note of playfulness appro- priate to the classical Hermes. Of course, every object of this kind has to earn its place aesthetically, regardless of any other meaning it might have. The mandril, positioned under one of the butresses, marks, on the upper path of the circuit, the entry to the area of the Labyrinth, lying opposite to the end of the retaining wall on the lower path. It also, with the pot at the centre of the Labyrinth, forms a diagonal with a small obelisk placed in the corner beyond it (fig. 44). 

The vertical accent of this obelisk, though modest, was necessary to ‘hold’ the slight slope of the space. There is a painting by Watteau in the National Gallery of Scotland, where three figures stand in a similar relationship to the obelisk, pot and mandril here (fig. 45). A confident and forthright personage (apparently a friend of Watteau’s) stands to the left (in the position of the obelisk), while a wistful, seated musician (probably a self-portrait of the artist) plays to the right (in the position of the mandril). Between them a beautiful young woman spreads out her shimmering silver dress, perhaps as part of the movement of a dance, in which the man on the left is her partner. The dynamic between these three figures is enigmatic and extremely poignant. The radiant young woman appears almost to step for- ward as the personification of the musette-player’s musical idea, offering herself unreservedly to her partner. This shimmering offering becomes, in the mouth of Hermes’ oracle, transfigured into the magical darkness of which I have already spo- ken, and which may also bring to mind another myth devoted to our occult trust in music: ‘when
very medium out of which a garden is made, space: that is, to recall, removed from temporal pressures, those conditions of existence – surely, the most fundamental of all – to which space entitles us.

After leaving Mnemosyne, the axial route follows the line of the canal until, after passing under a lime tree, it comes to the stone circle of the Muses [8], where six paths meet, as it were ‘calling in’ the motives of diaspora for one last time, in an act of poised remembrance, before we must decide which one of them to pursue (fig. 60).

Ignoring the routes leading into Ithaka or Epidauros, or back to the drive, we may for a moment step over a footbridge on to the canal dam to take a last look back towards Mnemosyne, an especially rewarding view in May (fig. 61), or when the rhododendrons on the south bank are out in June.

We then walk back down to where the stream flows into The Bolt [9]. Originally, before the lake was made, the stream cut a straight line through the centre of the whole of the valley (fig. 92). The area we are now in was an open field grazed by sheep, but always lined to the south by the tree-lined bank that forms the boundary with the Rudweg (figs 63, 67). The stream had been formally channelled beside this bank until it reached a little pond, which I had enlarged (the Dreikinderteich or ‘Three Child Pool’), where it was sometimes blocked in the summer, to flood the adjacent meadow. The area I call The Bolt is the corridor now formed by the stream and bank to the south, with the hedges of the Herse and Imbros enclosures to the north. It runs from the canal dam to the Dreikinderteich, at which point extensive views of the lake and the main garden are finally reached.

The passage from Artemis and the Muses through to The Bolt is a fateful transition in the development of the garden (fig. 62). As with the Epidauros lawn, but now with a gesture of impatient anticipation rather than...
partnership there – between meaning and space – was the ideal one. Yet so often, because it is more difficult to rectify or appropriate, the spatial part of this equation eludes adequate testimony in the account of human affairs. A garden tries to correct this imbalance by foregrounding the spatial component in the healing process. But its intimate responsibility in this regard is not (I think) best realized through omitting a partnering ‘poetic’ conscience. The poetic requirements addressed at Epidauros deserve to be part of a garden’s repertoire as well. Their inclusion is of vital, but delicate, concern. Perhaps we could say that poetics, too, is more dependent on internal curves, than the modern barn to give future shelter from the west, studded with occasional hazel and hawthorn forming a field boundary stretched away to the horizon. The central valley (and site of the main garden) in 1992 with the stream following its original course, before the lake was made. As in fig. 8, the valley was essentially a bare pasture. height of the blades on the mower and cut its shape into the lawn. After several adjustments, I would eventually spray the lower cut grass with weedkiller, which gave a very clear impression of the outline (fig. 128). It was lucky that in Epidauros I could use the raised terrace to survey the outlines from above before making any final decisions.

The open green architecture of Epidauros groups its hedges in a ring of related but separate curves around a central empty space punctuated by two hornbeam trees (figs 94, 95). This had to be a space of transition, leading from the enclosed gardens near to the house to the lawns around the lake, as well as a space with its sense of theatre. Given an open, well-drained site, you can grow as quickly as bench. The hedge was planted in 1994, and, like all the others in the garden, is expertly tended by Cyril (see fig. 243). Cornus sibirica ‘China Girl’ is to the left of the bench, and Ades pensylvanicus to the right.
It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the lake to the garden. It occupies the central place to which one is always drawn to return, like Narcissus, haunted by the need to keep a vigil by its shore (figs 79, 5, 159). It controls the way one negotiates the garden, and it has always seemed, through its interposition of a waterscape into the heart of the valley, to establish a fateful interval at the centre of the garden where before the ground formed a solid continuity (figs 125, 92). Before the lake was there, the valley seemed unconscious: it lacked self-awareness. But with the arrival of the lake and its mirror function this completely changed, as the valley turned into a place of reflection and introspection. And whereas before, the landform of the valley had appeared to do no more than persist, the lake, in placing at its heart a shining clearing, bestowed on the landscape a transparency and poise that seemed to give the valley a new vocation: perhaps it is not too much to say that the site was awoken out of its slumber into being a place of transmission, and offering.

In this chapter, I shall try to look into the heart of the garden lake, using Poussin, Taoism, alchemy and, of course, Narcissus as my guides. If these references seem alien to the world of gardening, I must simply acknowledge that, although there are many beautiful lakes in gardens, I cannot say that any one of them has been as important for the introduction of the lake at Plaz Metaxu as these alternative inspirations, which seem to set out – to me, at any rate – the optimal conditions – pictorial, poetic, philosophical, mythopoetic, psychological, spiritual – out of which the quintessentially liminal beauty of the garden lake is born.

I don’t know of any monograph on the garden lake. I would like to see one. Lakes at the centre of gardens are surprisingly rare. Brown’s lakes are usually peripheral. There is a fine ‘apron’ lake at Claremont (a centred body of water at the foot of the amphitheatre). The lake at Painshill, although central to the garden, is too variform to focus introspectively. The classical example is Stourhead. The lake there is nobly scenic, and a tour of the garden revolves around it. But for me, despite the inward-looking character of the garden, the lake experience at Stourhead remains essentially epic rather than introspective. The truth depends on a walk around a lake. [A lake carries you] into recesses of feeling that are otherwise impenetrable. Depression is the price of silver.
but first I want briefly to consider how the lakes in his paintings, any one of which could be said to constitute a scenic masterpiece, feature, perhaps even more importantly, as objective correlatives for how to be.

In paintings like the Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice (Fig. 112) or the Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake (Fig. 114), for instance, the lakes appear to be prescient – full of foreboding of the action that unfolds. One fears for the carefree naked youths in the background of the latter, as yet unaware of the tragedy in the foreground of the painting, as they dive with insouciance into the water that seems itself somehow already implicated in nature’s treachery (as signaled more explicitly by the snakebite).

On the other hand, in the Landscape with a Calm, the limpid serenity of the water has about it what one might call a blameless ephebe blue as if he human and the natural lived under a single benign jurisdiction (Fig. 115).

In the world of art, separate paintings, with serial, or at least companion, lakes are necessary to catch such different epiphanies, while in a garden the same lake will be ominous and beneficent by turn, depending on the ambient conditions of the day or hour (Figs. 116, 117).

But because its appearance is phenomenally erratic and versatile, the garden lake is no less for that, at any given moment, potentially an exemplification of human trials and blessings. We find in the world what we are prepared to bring to it, according to the wavelength of our attentiveness, how acutely observant, how consistently sustained, how emotionally and imaginatively inclusive. Or, put slightly differently, we might say that the example of Poussin encourages us to realize that, when we are moved enough by the world of appearances, the beauty we discover there cannot but involve us in the search for what its meaning might be, a meaning that hovers tantalizingly between implicit and explicit formulations. This search for meaning (which more often finds clues than it does solutions) is, I think, as much the preserve of the gardener as it is of the painter, provided the idiom of gardening is prepared to extend its repertoire to address the full range of our imaginative concerns. Poussin is also exemplary in that the world he allows to reveal itself to him is tragic as well as auspicious. Here again he sets a noble precedent too often (it seems to me) ignored by gardeners.

The positioning of the garden lake will greatly affect its sphere of influence. For the lake to exert its maximum power, it needs to be at the centre of the garden – that is, for its presence to be inescapable in terms of how the garden is experienced and conceived. I have suggested, in this respect, how Poussin’s lakes appear to be where they are as if by some kind of omphalic necessity. Empirically truthful and refined as they are, each seems to have, in addition, a Platonic identity, to be both this lake in particular and, at the same time, as Finlay might say, ‘lake as Lake’ 14. Once more, Poussin shows himself in this regard – that is, in his grasp of the ideal – not to demean the particular by turning it into a formula, but instead to dignify it by making its individual characteristics distinguished enough to be entitled to represent the entire class to which it belongs. For this reason, when we encounter a Poussin lake, we discover that the whole of our mind is addressed; the lake is satisfying both empirically, and as an exemplary Gestalt. The most astonishing Platonic lake to be found in Poussin’s oeuvre occurs in the Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe. 15
hellebores, which are planted underneath them, and all along the narrow central path (fig. 144). In autumn the leaves of this dogwood turn a deep, valedictory claret. Wild mint has arrived here of its own accord; intermittently, there are also poppies, and *Stipa gigantea* (the golden oat) takes the place of Demeter’s barley.

A wall of yew cuts across the slate path with only the narrowest of entrances through to the lower half of the enclosure. A second, parallel hedge of yew was initially planted below the first one, but, owing to the damper ground here, it had to be partially removed. Nonetheless, the yew still clearly defines a caesura, or break, in the falling rhythm of the enclosure, cutting across the run of the slope.

The momentary interruption is highlighted by the positioning of a large stone seat at the eastern end of the yew caesura, facing not down towards the lake, but west towards the opposite yew above, and beyond that, well hidden, to Hades itself. The seat is Demeter’s throne (fig. 228). We are told that, unable to find Persephone, the distraught goddess sat for a long while on a ‘laughless rock’, before eventually coming to the realization that, in order to be reunited with her daughter, she must make the journey down to Hades herself. (It was Helios, the sun god, who had finally advised her where her daughter had been taken.) The secret affinity between the Eleusis caesura and Hades is brought out by their shared frame of yew, and also by their mutual emptiness of plants. But whereas Hades functions as a destination (that becomes a turning point), the Eleusis caesura is, and remains, a dynamic threshold, a liminal space of pure transition. The transition works in two ways: from the point of view of Demeter’s throne, it suspends us in the mood of acute loss that foregrounds the awareness of Hades, with its accompanying uncanny perspective on life; while, from the point of view of the Eleusis enclosure as a whole, it marks...
their troubled souls. The subject of the discourse is the illusory status of material appearances, an insight into the nature of reality that is reinforced by the stark contrast presented between the two sides of the painting: the right-hand image of the sleeping Vishnu on the Milky Ocean ‘conjures a time when the universe was in a state of dissolution and only vast waters existed’. 24 When the Narcissus waterfall is flowing, in the left ‘panel’ of the view, it pairs with the ‘Alarm sail’ in the right panel, to complement, or re-enact, the text, creating a supplementary counterpoint to the other exchanges already mentioned as germane to Corenzuela: the dialogue between sensuous and visionary realities, between the prospect and the refuge, the light and the dark, the inward and the expansive, the secret and the manifest, the remedy and the wound, the creaturely and the illuminated, the finite and the immortal, the open and the closed. All these corresponding affective and spatial dialogues that come into play in the secluded little grove of Corenzuela help identify its indispensable status in the garden as the belvedere that compensates the dupless cast of things. 25

Orpheus holds a special place in the garden. 26 When I try to describe what my style of gardening is, I sometimes call it ‘caesural gardening’, or the two terms are intimately linked, for they both privilege a vocational acceptance of betweenness, a willingness to live, and come to terms, with gaps (or being in transit between different worlds). 27 In Rilke’s version of the myth Orpheus is presented as the ‘place that is between’, tries to return the poetic compliment to space by giving Orpheus the interval back. One can indeed find an image of the lyre in the garden more or less wherever one looks for it – in lake, labyrinth and ‘lovely meander’. 28 But the real homage to Orpheus derives rather from the garden’s willingness, whenever possible, to connect voice and place, to allow space to ‘open’, and vibrate, with the full repertoire of Orphic meanings. And Corenzuela, in the ways I have outlined, tries to play its part in this.

Say to the constant earth: I’m flowing.

Orpheus is the archetypal poet and musician, 29 his way of living is to triumph through singing. 30 In fact, for him, as Rilke says – ‘song is existence’. 31 Yet Rilke also defines Orpheus’ nature spatially, insisting on its wide and far-reaching character (seine weite Natur) which stretches between ‘both realms’ – of the living and the dead. 32 Maurice Blanchot also uses a spatial metaphor in his famous précis of the myth: ‘When Orpheus descends toward Eurydice, art is the power that opens the night.’ 33 If I speak, then, of the garden’s ‘Orphic spatiality’, I perhaps am trying, in a minor way, to reclaim, from a garden’s point of view, this affinity between space and music and poetry, which both grants to the interval its haunting elegy and, audaciously, ‘opens the night’. Put slightly differently: if Rilke recognized in Orpheus the archetypal figure of betweenness, who oscillates between worlds and ‘chooses transformation’ as the truest response to his (and our) radically intermediate status, then I might propose that the garden’s experiment, as the ‘place that is between’, tries to return the poet’s compliment to space by giving Orpheus the interval back. One can indeed find an image of the lyre in the garden more or less wherever one looks for it – in lake, labyrinth and ‘lovely meander’. 28 But the real homage to Orpheus derives rather from the garden’s willingness, whenever possible, to connect voice and place, to allow space to ‘open’, and vibrate, with the full repertoire of Orphic meanings. And Corenzuela, in the ways I have outlined, tries to play its part in this.

Say to the constant earth: I’m flowing.
Perhaps the ‘bleeding’ of the colour saffron from its tenuous crimson filaments accounts for its further association with courage and sacrifice. In mythology, the saffron crocus was born of the blood of the dying boy (the lover of either Smilax or Hermes) who gave the flower his name. I wanted, if possible, the choric space of Kedalion to foster a like rhythm of courage and kindness, as well as sharing in saffron’s image of sacrifice and light. For was this not part of what it meant for the valley to be undergoing in its own way some sort of Assumption (the very transformation that the Zigzag path on the opposite hillside, in one of its moods, had laid out as a structural possibility or promise)?

As I was familiarizing myself with the subdued thrill of gardening ‘high up’ (where ‘the gardens full of flowers’ set things to light with their ‘quiet fire’), the ground beneath my feet shifted from being a benchmark elevation (the kind of spatial privilege Kedalion had always supplied) into prompting a new form of spatial experience, a sort of shoulder-ransom, the sensation of being immaterially hoisted or lifted. It seemed the space itself was inviting me to participate in some new kind of ‘commission’, or ‘turning-point’, as Rilke might say: ‘Work of bearing is done. Now for some dance-steps!’

Perhaps because the normative and the transforming aspects of the field’s shoulderering function were now exchanging their identities so freely, I involuntarily thought of another Rilke poem, the very late and anarchic, yet nonetheless strangely unitive, Gong. Written in the last year of his life, this short poem of three stanzas is a final celebration of that play of reversals between normative and counter-normative perspectives – a paean to what I have called the ‘chiastic’ intuition – that Rilke had pioneered throughout his career.

He now develops his theme with breathtaking nonchalance:

No longer for ears … sound which, like a deeper ear, hears us, who only seem to be hearing. Reversal of spaces. Projection of innermost worlds into the Open . . . , temple before their birth, salvation saturated with gods that are almost insoluble . . . Gong!11

The sound of the gong here jubilantly absorbs, and lets go of, the perceptual and transcendental paradoxes that haunt our existence (if we permit them to). All the anomalies and the mysteries remain, but the gong sounds out a musical acceptance (rather than a disingenuous avoidance of them), reaching, as I see it, far into a choric (non-schismatic) space that seems—within the garden at least—to be a late-coming counterpart, on terra firme, to the liminal beauty of the lake below (also, as we saw, even-handed in its licence to let be and to let not be).